

**Testimony of Lizanne Cox
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358 Springside Avenue, New Haven, CT 06515
Testimony submitted to the Education Committee
February 15, 2013**

Honorable Chairpersons, Members of the Education Committee:

I am the director of Common Ground Environmental Studies Charter High School in New Haven, CT. Thank you for this opportunity today to testify on behalf of my small school and the thousands of children charter schools educate across the state.

We all are very happy that the Governor's budget restores the \$300-per-pupil spending cut that took place during this year's deficit mitigation plan. It was a shock when charter schools received such a significant blow to our per-pupil expenditure when our students already receive so much less than their friends in district schools. We're glad that the Governor hopes to undo this damage, and we are here today to urge legislators to follow through on the education reform promises made last year and support the Governor's per-pupil funding level for this year. After this year, we believe that it's only right to go back to the original commitment of last year's law, and the fund charter schools at \$11,500 per student.

The education reform law represents a critical and morally just step towards ensuring funding equity for all students in Connecticut public schools. Such reform is long overdue.

New Haven public schools -- from which 70 percent of our students come from -- spent about \$17,500 per student last year. Common Ground would receive \$10,500 per student from the Governor's budget plus additional local and federal funding because of the many students from challenging backgrounds we serve. This includes the almost 60 percent who receive free- or reduced-priced lunches and the 12 percent who qualify for special education support. That brings our total to about \$13,000 per student.

Clearly this is far less than the rest of the district. I would ask you why should public charter school students receive so much less than the kids who live down the street?

At a small, homegrown charter like Common Ground, every dollar counts. We have worked very hard over the last eight years to build the strongest possible academic program for our students. The increase in our per-pupil reimbursement this year definitely helped us to strengthen that program, specifically to expand both our upper-level academic offerings and the supports needed to ensure that all students can engage in them successfully.

That program works. Currently, our graduation rate is nearly 10 points above the state average, and last year, 97 percent of our students gained admission into college.

There is a catch 22, however. As our academic program becomes more rigorous, it also becomes more challenging to provide because we have real curricular demands that we need to meet. Next year, we need to offer physics, calculus, and upper-level language courses to ready our students for college. We need to provide the science equipment and supplies required for AP-level science classes. And, we need to provide the kind of intensive academic supports that we know help our disadvantaged students to be successful in challenging classes.

We face additional demands that strain resources as well. Like all public schools, we must meet the requirements of the new Common Core curriculum, teacher evaluations, and student support plan initiatives mandated by the State. These are important and valuable initiatives, but they require staffing and financial resources to implement well.

At current funding levels the reality is that we cannot do it all. To meet the academic needs of our students and the requirements of new SDE initiatives requires slicing the existing pie into smaller and smaller pieces. Do we purchase the technology needed to support the new teacher evaluation system or do we provide laboratory equipment and books for our AP biology students? There are only so many ways that existing resources and staff can be stretched before they break.

As a small charter, we have never expected more than fair funding that would allow us to offer our students the quality education they deserve. We pride ourselves on our efficiency, but we should not have to choose between supporting students in AP bio and implementing a new teacher evaluation system well. We ask you to support us by helping to ensure that the promises made in the Governor's education reform law become a reality. Please help my students to know that they too are valued.

Thank you.